

REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT PLANNING BOARD (RSDPB)

Status Report from the Chair

July 26, 2013

The Regional School District Planning Board (RSDPB), representing the Towns of Amherst, Leverett, Pelham and Shutesbury, decided July 18, 2013 that it will not present a school regionalization proposal to voters until spring 2014, possibly at the Annual Town Meetings and elections. The RSDPB previously planned to ask for voter approval of a regionalization plan in November 2013 with a new region to become operational on July 1, 2014 for the school year beginning that September. The new approval date of spring 2014 will delay the transition to a regional school district by at least one year.

The additional time will allow the RSDPB to develop a plan that best addresses the needs of the children and the Towns, to explain the benefits and the consequences of the proposed change to voters, and allow for a slower and more deliberate transition and implementation of the new region.

In Massachusetts, each of the 351 towns and cities is responsible for supporting and maintaining its schools. Many towns are too small to support schools for grades from pre-kindergarten through the twelfth grade or find that it is more efficient and provides better education for students to combine those efforts by forming a regional district with neighboring communities. The four towns that form the RSDPB have been a region since 1953 that combine grades 7-12 in a Middle School (formerly Junior High) and High School. The RSDPB, which was created by the Town Meetings of the four towns in 2011, has been looking at possible regionalization of preK-6 elementary schools for more than a year.

The RSDPB's first conclusion is that the education of our children will be better if we combine the four town's elementary schools into a regional district with oversight and leadership by one Superintendent for all grades. Currently the elementary schools of Amherst and Pelham (also known as Union 26) share one Superintendent with the four town 7-12 region, and the elementary schools of Leverett and Shutesbury share a Superintendent with Erving, Wendell, and New Salem (Union 28). Education continues to become more complex as the expectations of communities and parents grow and there are more mandates from the federal and state government. Schools must provide education that enables students to succeed on the state MCAS examinations and they must meet the new Common Core curriculum standards. Massachusetts is committed to full implementation of those standards.

As these new standards are met, each school should respond to the expectations of parents and the community. That may be reflected in how the standards are met and the additional subjects offered, such as art, music, technology, world languages, and physical education. If schools fail to do so, students leave for alternatives such as charter, choice, private, or home schools and public support for the schools will decline. At the same time, the number of students requiring free or reduced lunch, after school alternatives, language support, or special education has increased. There is also an expectation and a commitment to provide any special services in the regular classrooms if possible and to minimize the expense. Elementary school enrollment is declining in three of our towns, with Shutesbury as the exception. Finally, schools are challenged to meet these needs with expenses that increase annually, limited state support, and local property taxes that can only increase by 2½% without a voter-approved tax override.

The RSDPB concluded that these expectations can be best met by a well-run regional district that allows for sharing experiences and resources across buildings, coordinating elementary (preK-6)

and secondary (grade 7-12) schools, and more efficiently managing schools through one central office under the common direction of a highly qualified Superintendent. The result will be better and more stable schools.

The RSDPB recognized challenges that must be addressed as a regionalization plan is developed. Each of the four towns has an elected School Committee that is responsive to its community and oversees education, and that appoints members to the current 7-12 Regional School Committee. State law has changed and now places more responsibility with the Superintendent and school principals, diminishing some of the historic roles of School Committees. That makes the School Committee responsibility to select and evaluate the Superintendent particularly important. These School Committees also have major responsibilities to approve budget proposals and to communicate with their Select Boards, Finance Committees, and Town Meetings to secure support and passage of the budgets. It is difficult for any group of communities to create the structure and election process for a regional School Committee that will assure that parents and other residents all have effective access to that new Regional School Committee. Our four towns have an additional challenge since one town, Amherst, has more than 85% of the region's population. There is a constitutional requirement that all voters be counted equally.

The elementary schools are important for each community, as centers of education for young children, for community identity and pride, and as community centers. Each town is committed to the continuation of its school(s). However, if enrollments decline, costs increase, or expectations change, it may not be feasible to continue to maintain all of the schools that presently exist. The RSDPB recognizes the need to assure that there will be a deliberate and careful process if it ever becomes necessary for a future School Committee to consider whether to discontinue the operation of any elementary school.

Another challenge is to understand the cost difference between operating schools separately or within a region, combined for all of the towns and separately for each town. We have determined it will cost less on a four-town combined basis. Once a budget is determined, there must be a method to allocate the shares for each town as assessments (as has been done for decades with the 7-12 region) and the result must be reasonable and affordable for all towns. Finally, there are additional needs to understand the terms of the regionalization, the ownership and operation of the buildings including capital needs, and the transition.

From March until July, 2013, the RSDPB considered how to design a regional district for preK- 6 that would be separate from the current grade 7-12 region but coordinate with it, including sharing a Superintendent and central office. On July 18, 2013 the RSDPB decided that it also needs to consider other models for regionalization that will best serve the combined and unique needs of each of the towns. The RSDPB remains committed to designing a model that will provide the benefits of a region for all of our children and serve each town. The revised schedule for this process will provide the opportunity to do so.

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Regional School District Planning Board
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